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Governance Practice in English Further Education Colleges: The Purpose of Further Education governance and the changing role of Standard Committee governors

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Abstract

This article explores the purpose of governance in the Further Education (FE) sector in England and the increasing tasks demands that are expected from Standards Committees' (SC) governors as part of their changing role. It will then examine how these task demands impact SC governors' perception of FE governance. This research is done at a critical time when central government challenges the sector to strike a balance on the purpose of FE governance as: maximising institutional performance and success; accountability and compliance and governance for representation and democracy. A multi-case study design was used. 6 principals and 14 SC governors from 6 FE colleges in the English Midlands region were purposefully selected to participate in this study. Data were obtained from individually, digitally recorded face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that, FE governance is very important but the purpose(s) that it serves is ambiguous and that the task demands expected from SC governors have greatly increased causing detrimental effects on their perception of FE governance. In order to help improve practice, a new role conceptualisation for SC governors is suggested.

Key words

education governance, governing, governors, further education colleges, governing board, standards committees

Introduction

Research interest in education governance has tremendously increased in recent years. One of the reasons behind this heightened interest is policy change in train in England and elsewhere such as the increased autonomy of educational institutions, reduced funding for schools and colleges, the continual emphasis on enhancing student attainment and achievement, and the emphasis on inter-organisational collaboration. However, despite this monumental change in policy direction by central government, there has been very little research that focuses on the changing role of FE governors in England; the increasing task demands expected from them and how this impact their perceptions of FE governance. As described by Bush (2003:19), 'there is no large-scale study of the role of governors in FE...yet governors and principals are two corners of a leadership triangle which also may involve other senior and middle managers'. This lack of research on FE governance has been attributed to two factors: FE's historical invisibility and that until recently, the FE has been labelled as a 'Cinderella' sector or in Nash, et al.'s words (2008:8) a 'neglected middle child' of the British education system. This image of the FE in comparison to Compulsory and Higher Education sectors is gradually changing, as Simons (2012) points out, the epithet 'Cinderella' is fading as vocational learning gains recognition as a key contributor to economic and cultural growth.

This study focuses on SC governors. These are governors, who in recent years have been tasked by their Governing Boards (GB) to the key area of college work that deals with educational matters – student performance, teaching and learning. The study therefore, sets out to explore the tasks that

SC governors consider to be part of their new role and then examine how the demands expected from them impact their perception of FE college governance. In order to explore these issues and the purpose that governance serves in the FE sector, the study posed the following research questions:

1. What purpose does governance serve in FE colleges?
2. What duties do SC governors consider to be part of their changing role?
3. To what extent does the task demands expected from SC governors' impact their perception of FE governance?

Background

In England, a number of central policy decisions over the years have contributed to the emergence of current education governance. In the 1980s and 90s, different Conservative governments introduced a number of reforms to the public service. One reason for these reforms was to respond to globalisation trends going on in different parts of the world (Cope, et al. 2003) and the other was that, these Conservative governments did not have much trust in teachers and wanted to diminish the professional domination of the previous regime (Ranson, 2008). So, they pro-actively promoted a culture of market principles amongst schools and colleges in order to withdraw from the direct delivery of public services and programmes (Cornforth, 2003). Therefore, through the 1988 Education Reform Act, new 'public management' (Pollit, 1993:10) models adopted from the private sector were introduced in an attempt to improve efficiency; replacing elected board members by appointees and making greater use of performance indicators and multiple audits (Cornforth, 2003). Crucial to all these reforms was the 1992 Further and Higher Education incorporation Act, which took effect in April 1993 and removed FE colleges from Local Education Authority Control. Through this Act, FE colleges became independent self-governing institutions and this greatly increased the responsibilities of FE governing boards, as Gleeson and Shain (1999) point out, after incorporation, the whole responsibility for a college's future rested with the GB.

Various criticism have been labelled against this type of education governance, for example, the rise in 'managerialism' in the public sector (Pollit, 1993) challenged the rather simplistic assumption that it is lay councillors or board members who make policy and officers who carry it out (Cornforth, 2003). One view is that those developments have led to the 'hollowing out of the state' (Rhodes, 1994) and have challenged central power. Rhodes (1994) adopted the phrase 'hallowing out of the state' to describe central government policy (in the 1980s and early 90s) of the devolution of power to local governments or regional institutions through a process of delegation, decentralisation and privatisation. The 'hollowed-out state' is exemplified in the subsequent rise of public management and market ideology (Rhodes, 1997). The counter view is that this process of governance can be seen as part of a state strategy for retaining and enhancing political control (Bache, 2003). A detailed discussion of these views is not an intention of this paper.

Following 17 years of Conservative government, New Labour took office in 1997 with hopes for change as promised in Tony Blair's education mantra – Education, education and education (Blair, 2004). Despite many promises for reform, the New Labour government did not do much in reforming the educational governance of the previous regime. In fact, as Ranson (2008) reports, 'it accentuated the characteristics of neo-liberal education, increasingly constituting schooling as an independently governed corporate sector'. It is against this background that FE governance trajectory can be traced. I now consider the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

Literature Review

Although, a large number of academic writers (see Bush, 2003) see education governance as a ‘sine qua non’ of leadership in education, defining the concept of ‘governance’ is not easy as there are many competing theories about what governance actually means. The term governance is used in different ways in many disciplines such as Management, Public Administration, Public Policy and Politics. For Khooiman (2003), governance is the totality of theoretical conceptions on governing. Rhodes (1997:15) refers to governance as ‘self-organising, inter-organisational networks characterised by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state’. While Gleeson and Shain (1999) use the term to refer to the transfer of powers in FE from locally elected to appointed governors, as part of a centrally controlled process of financial and management devolution at college level. In this study, the main focus is on the organisational level, and the term is primarily used to refer to the arrangements for organisational and corporate governance—that is the system by which FE colleges are directed, controlled and made accountable (Cornforth, 2003). Central to this, is the organisation’s GB, which carries out formal responsibilities for the organisation.

To help us conceptualise the roles of governors in the FE sector, I agree with (Cornforth and Edwards, 1998; Cornforth’s, 2003) assertion that the governance of public and non-profit organisations such as FE colleges is relatively under-theorised in comparison with governance of business corporations. Drawing from literature on the roles of GBs in the private sector, Cornforth (2003) proposes parallel models of governance that can help us to conceptualise the roles of GBs in FE colleges. These are, *The Compliance model*: in which the role of the board is to control managers; *Partnership model*: the role of the board is to improve organisational performance; *Stakeholder model*: the role of the board is balancing stakeholders’ needs; *Democratic model*: the role of the board is to choose between the interests of different groups; *The Co-option model*: the role of the board is to maintain good relations with key external stakeholders and the *Rubber stamp model*: where the role of the board is to rubber-stamp managerial decisions.

Notwithstanding Cornforth’s (2003) proposal, I now focus on what Schofield (2009) calls the ‘dominant model’ of governance in the English FE college sector – the *Partnership model*. This model is based on varying degree on the cooperation between governors, managers and other parties involved such as students (Schofield, 2009). The operating premise is that the interests of all are shared and that managers want to do a good job and will act as effective stewards of an organisation’s resources. As a result, managers and owners of an organisation are seen as partners. Typically, corporations with this approach operate through a committee system such as the SC in focus, with senior managers participating in meetings as active observers. Hence, the main function of the GB is to improve organisational performance rather than conformance or compliance. From this perspective, board members should be selected on the basis of their expertise and contacts so that they are in a position to add value to the organisation’s decisions. More recently, GBs have been urged to change emphasis from governors who are often more experienced at handling business matters to governors with a greater background in education (Davies, 2002). Most FE GBs responded to this call by constituting SC within their structures and tasked them with overseeing their colleges’ educational character – monitoring quality, teaching and learning as well as organisational outcomes. However, despite this change in priorities from business to educational, Rogers (2012) observes that, very little research has looked into how much time GBs are devoting to this key area of college work (educational) and the implications of this to the learners. In this light, exploring the changing role and demands placed upon SC governors will in educational, strategic and financial terms offer new insights into practice, policy and further research within this field.

School governance literature (e.g. Farrell, 2005; Walters and Richardson 1997; Brundrett and Rhodes, 2011) informs us that the provisions of government legislation since 1986 have combined to make more demands on governors than ever before. Similarly recent literature on FE governance acknowledges the same trend (Parnham, 1998; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Davies, 2002; Gleeson, et al. 2010). Gleeson and Shain (1999) for example state that governors now had far greater powers and responsibilities to determine the educational character and mission of the college...and to deal with all matters of staffing. These increasing responsibilities placed on governors that the authors report here is very important for this study because it is what SC governors are expected to do and is also what Ofsted emphasises in its new FE inspection framework. The recent Ofsted Inspection Report for instance, tells us that 8 of the 13 colleges judged to be inadequate last year had inadequate governance. In these colleges, GBs had failed to monitor the college's performance in sufficient detail or to provide the right kind of challenge (Ofsted, 2012).

However, unlike in the schools sector, where the general responsibilities of GBs reflect two main purposes of education governance as ensuring institutional legitimacy and effectiveness (James, et al. 2010), the purpose of FE governance is not clearly defined. Earlier research by Gleeson and Shain (1999:556) indicate that FE governance serves the dual purpose of transferring business values into the corporate culture of FE colleges and at the same time injecting greater market and managerial realism into an area of public sector education, 'seen to be carrying excess fat and suffering from dogged sloth'. Recent studies (Schofield, 2009; Gleeson, et al. 2010) concur that the purpose of FE college governance is not predefined, and is left to each college GB to address for them. The aim of this study therefore is to find out from governors and principals who are involved in FE governance what purpose governance serves in this little researched FE sector.

Research Design

Semi- structured interviews were carried out with 14 FE SC Governors and 6 Principals in 6 case study colleges in the English Midlands region. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select participants. Such a sampling strategy is useful in situations where certain important information cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 1996). The actual interviews lasted for about an hour each. I recorded them using a tape recorder and transcribed them myself. Transcripts were colour-coded and emerging patterns and recurrent themes were analysed. This research was granted ethical approval by Birmingham University and BERA, 2011's ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the investigation. Three overarching questions were formulated to help me answer my research questions. All interviews were done at respective colleges and I asked the following questions:

1. In your view, what is the purpose of FE college governance?
2. As a governor who sits on the 'Standards committees' of your college, can you please describe briefly what you do in practice?
 - What is the remit of your role?
 - Can you describe the responsibilities that are commensurate with this role?
3. Since joining the SC, has your perception of college governance changed in any way?

Findings

As can be seen above, all the three questions were open-ended questions, structured in a way that would allow my interviewees to elaborate their answers. My first question (In your view, what is the purpose of college governance?) was posed to both governors and principals and my intention was

to get personal variation regarding governors and principals' views on the purpose of FE governance. Responses to this question are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Governors' Responses	Principals' Responses
Offering what the community needs	To oversee the operations of management so that the views of the local community are properly represented
Setting the strategic direction of the college	To set the direction of the college To oversee the overall activities of the college
Stewardship of the assets of the college	Legally they have responsibility in terms of disposal of state and purchasing because of financial regulations and the entire responsibility of committing the college financially
It ensure that the educational character and mission of the college is set	I think it's making sure that governors set the tone, the educational tone and character of this college.
It serves as an external checks and balance To monitor and challenge management	To provide checks and balances Keeping the college honest Monitoring the performance of the college
Financial viability Ensuring that public money is spent appropriately for the benefit of the public	Making sure that financially in education we are sound
It is about what you bring to the table-expertise	
To appoint a strong principal and senior management team	
To make the institution legitimate	

A comparison of the purpose of FE governance from Governors and Principals

As shown on Table 1, this finding shows that there is general agreement between governors and principals interviewed that the purposes of FE college governance are varied. One governor precisely summarised the purpose of FE governance as follows:

It ensures that the educational format of the college is set. Make sure that the finance is in good order, that is important and we make sure that there is a quality system in place to deliver good quality results- primarily what we are worried about is students – to provide students of (College B) and surrounding areas with opportunities to develop their skills...As governors, sitting on the back of the principal and his team, asking what about that? What about this?

Similarly, one principal succinctly remarked:

I think governors keep the college honest. They ensure that they are scrutiny, they ensure that there is a sounding body... they ensure that the executive don't go beyond their power and limits, they ensure that the strategy and focus stays on mission. So, they do have an important role there which is about checks and balances and moderating and keeping the organisation honest – to one of their phrase.

In the same vein, another principal also said this about the purpose of FE college governance:

...I think it's making sure that governors set the educational tone of the college...governors are responsible for the overall college activities, the educational character of the college, quality, efficiency, they approve the budget, and they approve my pay, the pay of the staff....

However, as can be seen from table 1, slight variations seems to exist on a few points such as on appointing a strong principal and senior management team; to make the institution legitimate and also that governance is about what governors bring to the table as one governor pointed out:

...the purpose of the whole governance is to have people from a wide range of backgrounds, you got business people, accounts people, somebody interested in the curriculum, staff governors, students' governors, and we have got a whole range of expertise there. So, it's about what you can bring to the table.

It seems clear from this finding that both governors and principals concur that governance serves many purposes in FE as shown in table 1. It also appears that there are significant differences on the emphasis of particular aspects of governance from both groups. This lack of a clear purpose of what FE college governance serves causes confusion and exposes it to subjective interpretations by clerks, chairs and managers. This study suggest that, as the weight of responsibilities for FE governors increases and FE governance priorities shift from business to educational, there is a need to review the purpose that governance serves in the FE sector.

My second research question was directed to SC governors only and was meant to elicit data on the tasks they consider to be part of their new role in practice. I was aware that, in theory, the Chair, Principal and the Clerk of GBs are the ones who are tasked to interpret what governors do. Answers to this question vary: monitoring performance; overseeing the overall educational matter of the college; asking relevant questions; setting the strategic direction of the college; providing comments and feedback; ensuring that we are providing the right course, at the right level for the people of (Town, A) and it is our job to ensure that the college fall at the top of the list rather than towards the bottom where it used to be. One SC governor succinctly said this about his role:

The SC obviously monitors the standards of performance of the students and also in fact it is responsible for looking and ensuring that the college has itself a quality assurance process, which is capable of asking the correct questions and maintaining the quality of provision, the courses, the teaching and obviously concerned with the outcomes as well, the standards which students reach.

When asked about the responsibilities that are commensurate with their new role, most governors said the two run into the other, but went on to give the following responsibilities: thorough reading of documents, checking policies, asking relevant questions and to look at data objectively and see what is happening, as one governor puts it ‘I have got a responsibility to ask questions, to ask why we are doing a certain thing, why in that particular area students are not passing’.

From this finding, it seems clear that SC governors are increasingly expected to perform a wide range of tasks as part of their new role of overseeing their college’s educational character. These increased task demands require a new set of skills and competences. This article suggests a new role conceptualisation for SC governors in order to help improve their practice.

Finally I asked SC governors whether the increased task demands expected from them impact their perception of FE governance? Interestingly, most of these governors said their perception of FE college governance has greatly changed from that they had when they joined the corporation. These governors joined the corporation at different times, but all have served at least 2 years on the post. The perceived changes ranges from: not being afraid to comment about issues now as before; being able to distinguish between governance and management; the ability to understand the operational environment in which they perform their duties and more appreciation of what their duties contribute to the leadership of colleges, as one governor remarked, ‘yes, my view of governance has changed. I think governors have greater relevance now than when I first became governor in 2008. When I first became governor, they were just like nodding men on the table...’ Other perceived changes mentioned were the cultural working environment in which these governors work and the pressure of coping with the increasing responsibilities of governance as one governor succinctly said:

...year by year it’s getting harder. What we are expected to do and support, just FE itself-funding regimes the targets etc. are becoming tougher year on and year on. The college is quite a different animal to the one I saw when I came to (Town A) in 1986. Quite a different thing and I think the responsibility of a governor have increased quite enormously...

This finding shows that although the work of SC governors is now more relevant than ever before, the responsibilities and task demands expected from governors have greatly increased, which have an adverse impact on their perception of FE governance. In order for SC governors to effectively fulfil their new role, there is a need to review the task demands expected from them and match these with their competences.

Discussion

The findings show that, although the purpose of FE college governance is to ensure institutional legitimacy and effectiveness (James, et. al, 2010); governance also serves many other purposes in this sector. This partially contradicts earlier studies by Gleeson and Shain (1999) which found out that FE governance serves the dual purpose of transferring business values into the corporate culture of FE and to inject market principles into the management of FE colleges. However, nascent studies by (Schofield, 2009; Gleeson, et al. 2010) indicate that the purpose of FE college governance is not pre-defined by the Articles and Instruments of Government but is left for each college GB to decide for themselves. This probably explains the variations from both governors and principals on what purpose they think governance serves in their colleges. This lack of clarity on the purpose of FE governance causes confusion and exposes the task demands expected from SC governors’ to various interpretations and raises the question of who knows what FE governance is or what it should be – clerks, governors, principals or policy makers? So, this article suggests the need to review the purpose of FE governance in order to help improve practice.

The findings also reveal that the task demands expected from SC governors in their new role have greatly increased. This finding does not contradict literature cited in this study which shows that FE college GBs have shifted their priorities from business to educational (Davies, 2002; Rogers, 2012). These increased task demands require a new set of skills and competences from SC governors. They need to be good governors with a good skill base, who know exactly what is expected from them. The article suggests a new role conceptualisation for SC governors in order to help improve practice.

Finally, the findings also show that, the increased task demands expected from SC governors have an adverse impact on their perception of FE governance. These governors face many challenges working in a complex, fast changing and heavily regulated FE environment. Empirical studies also acknowledge the challenges that governors' face working in an increasingly regulated FE cultural environment (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Gleeson et al. 2010). This study suggests a review of the task demands expected from SC governors. Such a review will help to conceptualise the educational role of governors in this turbulent sector.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has shown that the purpose of FE college governance in England is ambiguous; that SC governors are expected to perform an increasing number of tasks in their new role and that these increasing responsibilities have an adverse impact on their perception of FE governance. The study therefore suggests a new conceptualisation of the educational role of governance in FE in order to help improve practice. Although these findings are useful in provoking debate on FE governance, they are based on the views of Principals and SC governors in case study colleges only. Further cross-sector research would be useful to find out the purpose of governance in those sectors, for instance compulsory and higher education sectors and compare this with the purpose of governance in FE. It would also be helpful to have further research with a much broader sample of SC governors to find out the extent to which the current study's findings can be corroborated by other UK institutions.

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